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ABSTRACT

Three hundred seventy-two college students completed person description questionnaires in an examination of social stereotyping of the physically handicapped. Ss rated a person identified by either age and sex (minimal description condition); age, sex, and as a person the S would like (liking condition); or age, sex, and either blind, deaf, or wheelchair-bound (disability conditions). Results indicated that in comparison to the minimally described person and the liked person, the disabled person was viewed as less socially skilled, more dependent, more politically conservative, and more personnally good. It was also found that the blind, deaf, and wheelchair persons were described as being quite similar to each other. (Author/CL)

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SOCIAL STEROTYPING OF THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED

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Abstract

Although the hypothesis that the disabled are perceived as different is widely accepted, very little research has been done to delineate ways in which the disabled are viewed as different. The present research investigated three questions: On what dimensions are the disabled viewed as different from the able-bodied? Are differences, where they occur, in a positive or in a negative direction? Is there a general stereotype of the disabled such that persons with different disabilities are viewed similarly? To explore these issues, participants responded to a person description questionnaire on which they rated a person identified by either: age and sex (minimal description condition), age, sex and as a person the subject would like (liking condition), age, sex, and either blind, deaf, or confined to a wheelchair (disability conditions). Results indicated that in comparison to the minimally described person and the liked person, the disabled person was viewed as less socially skilled, as more dependent, as more politically conservative, and as more personally good. It was also found that the blind, deaf and wheelchair persons were all described as being quite similar to each other.

SOCIAL STEREOTYPING OF THE PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED

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There is considerable evidence that physical disability influences social interactions. Young children prefer to interact with an able-bodied child rather than with a disabled child (Centers and Centers, 1963; Richardson, Hastorf, Goodman, and Dornbusch, 1961) and adults terminate social interaction sooner with a stranger who is physically disabled than with a stranger who is able-bodied (Kleck, Ono, and Hastorf, 1966). It has been hypothesized that the able-bodied are less positive about interacting with the disabled because they percieve the disabled as different on social and emotional as well as physical demensions. Indeed, the existence of a strong positive relationship between percieved similarity and attraction has been repeatedly demonstrated. (Byrne, 1969; and Weinberg-Asher, 1973).

Wright (1960) theorizes that the physically disabled come to be perceived as different through the mechanism of spread. Spread occurs when a single physical disability is perceived as effecting other aspects of the person. For example, people often talk more loudly to a person who is blind, assuming that he is also hard of hearing. People address questions to the companion of a disabled person rather than to the disabled person him/herself, assuming that the disabled person is either too immature, or too unintelligent to respond. Through spread the disabled may also come to be viewed as possessing certain superior abilities. The blind, for example, are sometimes believed to possess a heightened sensitivity to the thoughts and feelings of others. Great courage may also be ascribed to them. However, regardless of whether inferior or superior attributions are made, Wright suggests that the disabled are often perceived as different on physical as well as non physical dimensions.

Although the belief that the disabled are perceived as different is widely accepted, research has not adequately delineated the specific manner in which the disabled are viewed as different. To fully understand how the disabled are seen, people's perceptions of the disabled should be compared with their perceptions of the able-bodied. Second, data should be obtained on how a liked person is rated to determine whether any observed differences between the able-bodied and disabled are in a positive or negative direction. Third, information is needed on how persons with different disabilities are viewed if generalizations are to be made about perceptions of the handicapped as a group. Idealy all of these compariesons should be made using the same population of raters, same rating scales and the same dimensions.

Previous research (Comer and Piliavan 1975 and Ray 1946) has compared traits attributed to a person in a wheelchair with those attributed to an able-bodied person and ratings of a handicapped person with ratings of an ideal person (Mussen and Barker, 1944). Thus, the few studies done in this area focus on one or another of these comparisons but not all three.

In the present research, college students filled out a questionnaire which asked them to rate a particular type of person on a wide variety of personality and attitude dimensions. Students were assigned a person to rate who was identified by either: age and sex (minimal description condition), age, sex and as a person the subject would like (liking condition), age, sex and either blind, deaf or confined to a wheelchair (blind condition, deaf condition and wheelchair condition). The purpose of the minimal description condition was to identify traits attributed to able-bodied persons of the same age and sex as persons in the disability conditions. The liking condition served to establish traits of a desirable, able-bodied person of a similar age and sex. Finally, the three disability conditions were used to determine how persons of a similar age and sex but with different physical disabilities were viewed.

Method

Subjects

Three hundred seventy-two undergraduate students enrolled in two introductory child psychology courses at the University of Illinois participated in the study. There were 129 males and 243 females.

Questionnaire

A 29 item person description questionnaire was used. Each item of the questionnaire described a personality or attitude dimension. The dimensions were presented along a seven point scale. For example:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not conscientious		somewhat conscientious		fairly conscientious		very conscientious

Included on the person description questionnaire were the following traits and attitudes: conscientious, emotional, intelligent, creative, religious, impulsive, selfish, self-pitying, cheerful, popular, moral, well-adjusted, trustworthy, aggressive, sensitive, frustrated with life, happy, courageous, honest, enjoyable to be with, likable, self-confident, physically attractive, similar to yourself, relaxing to be with, dependent on other people for help, attitude toward money as an important goal in life, attitude toward abortion on demand, and attitude toward liberal ideas. The above items were chosen to be included on the questionnaire since they represent dimensions often associated with the disabled in anecdotal reports or previous research (Mussen and Baker, 1944; Ray, 1946).

Procedure

During a regular class session students were asked to fill out a person description questionnaire. Each student was ramdomly assigned one type of person to evaluate on the questionnaire. Students rated one of the following: a) 20-year old male, b) 20-year old female, c) 20-year old male I would like, d) 20-year old female I would like, e) 20-year old male confined to a wheelchair, f) 20-year old female

confined to a wheelchair, g) 20-year old blind male, h) 20-year old blind female, i) 20-year old deaf male, or j) 20-year old deaf female.

Students were not told that they would be rating different persons. They were told only that this was a study of how people perceive other people. The specific person the student was to rate was described in the written instructions preceding the person description questionnaire. The instructions were:

> On the following scale would you please describe a _____. Respond to each item by circling the number closest to the adjective or attitude that you feel would probably best describe such an individual. Please respond to each item; guess if you are unsure.

Inserted in the blank in the instructins was a description of the person the individual was to rate, for example, the blank might be filled in with the phrase "a 20-year old male I would like" or with the description "a 20-year old female confined to a wheelchair." At the top of each questionnaire students were asked to identify their own sex.

Data Analysis

As a first step, a principal component factor analysis was performed on questionnaire responses to see which items fell along common dimensions. Orthogonally rotating the factor matrix on the six factors which accounted for 98 percent of the variance, the following factors emerged: an Interactive factor, Self-Involvement factor, Goodness factor, Sensitivity factor, Independence factor, and Conservatism factor. Table 1 presents the item loadings on each factor after rotation. As indicated all items loaded over .33 on their respective factors.

Table 1

Item Loadings on Each Factor

Factor Items	Item Loadings
Interactive Factor	
Enjoyable to be with	.79
Relaxing to be with	.78
Likeable	.74
Happy	.72
Popular	.69
Cheerful	.68
Physically attractive	.64
Well adjusted	.59
Trustworthy	.54
Honest	.50
Similar to yourself	.49
Intelligent	.44
Aggressive	.39
Independence Factor	
Dependent on others for help	.51
Self confident	.49
Conservatism Factor	
Attitude toward abortion on demand	.66
Attitude toward to liberal ideas	.65
Goodness Factor	
Moral	.61
Religious	.52
Courageous	.37
Impulsive	.34
Self-Involvement Factor	
Selfish	.63
Self Pitying	.52
Frustrated with life	.51
Belief that money is an important goal in life	.44
Sensitivity Factor	
Emotional	.66
Sensitive	.48
Conscientious	.43
Creative	.42

Within each factor, tests were then performed to see whether ratings on the individual items of the factor varied with the sex of the person doing the rating, the sex of the person being rated or the status of the person being rated (minimal description condition, liking condition, blind condition, deaf condition, and wheelchair condition). Thus a 2 X 2 X 5 (sex of rater X sex of ratee X condition of ratee) analysis of variance was carried out on each item. Where significant effects were obtained the Scheffé test for post hoc comparisons was used to further analyze the differences. Because of the large sample size and number of tests being performed the significance level for the analysis of variance and post hoc tests was set at .01. Unless otherwise indicated the differences reported below are significant at the .01 level or beyond.

Results

The first question to be examined was whether there were differences in how the blind person, the deaf person, and the wheelchair person were seen. Interestingly, persons with these disabilities received similar ratings on 27 of the 29 personality and attitude dimensions. The person in the wheelchair was viewed as less physically attractive than the blind and deaf person and the deaf person was seen as less dependent on others for help than both the blind and wheelchair person. On all other items the blind person, deaf person and wheelchair person were percived as quite similar. As a result of this finding, in presenting the data on differences between perceptions of the able-bodied and disabled, the three disability conditions are treated as a single group. Table 2 presents the condition of ratee effects found on the individual items.

Table 2

Condition of Ratee Effects

	X of Liking Condition	X of Minimal Description Condition	X of Wheelchair Condition	X of Blind Condition	X of Deaf Condition	F-Ratio	Probability
Interactive Factor							
Enjoyable to be with	6.5	5.6	4.5	4.6	4.6	42.26	.000
Relaxing to be with	6.0	5.0	3.9	3.6	3.6	45.21	.000
Likeable	6.5	5.5	4.9	4.9	4.8	27.68	.000
Happy	6.0	5.0	4.1	4.3	4.3	35.01	.000
Popular	4.8	4.9	3.5	3.5	3.3	31.90	.000
Cheerful	6.0	5.4	4.2	4.4	4.4	34.50	.000
Physically attractive	5.0	4.8	3.5	4.1	4.2	19.96	.000
Well adjusted	5.8	4.7	4.6	4.5	4.3	16.54	.000
Trustworthy	6.3	5.3	5.2	5.4	5.4	12.34	.000
Honest	6.3	5.2	5.2	5.4	5.2	14.24	.000
Similar to yourself	4.5	4.0	3.7	3.8	3.9	5.63	.000
Intelligent	5.8	5.3	5.0	4.8	4.7	11.74	.000
Aggressive	4.1	4.5	3.3	3.0	3.2	16.04	.000
Independence Factor							
Dependent on others for help	3.1	3.2	3.7	3.7	3.3	3.34	.011
Self confident	5.3	4.9	4.2	4.3	4.1	12.65	.000
Conservatism Factor							
Attitudes toward abortion on demand	4.5	4.7	4.1	4.1	3.8	3.06	.016
Attitude toward liberal ideas	5.2	5.4	4.8	4.5	4.5	8.10	.000
Goodness Factor							
Moral	4.9	4.1	4.9	4.9	5.1	7.41	.000
Religious	3.6	3.1	4.6	4.4	4.9	18.74	.000
Courageous	5.1	4.2	4.9	4.9	4.7	4.33	.002
Impulsive	3.6	4.2	3.1	2.7	3.1	11.72	.000
Self Involvement Factor							
Selfish	1.9	3.4	3.3	3.0	3.1	14.23	.000
Self pitying	2.0	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.3	14.78	.000
Frustrated with life	2.4	3.9	4.0	3.7	3.7	19.13	.000
Belief that money as an important goal in life	3.2	4.3	3.3	3.1	3.0	9.44	.000
Sensitivity Factor							
Emotional	4.2	4.6	4.9	4.6	4.7	2.40	.050
Sensitive	4.7	5.2	5.1	5.2	5.4	2.03	.089
Conscientious	5.1	4.9	5.4	5.5	5.5	3.31	.011
Creative	5.3	4.5	4.8	4.5	4.7	4.76	.001

Interactive Factor

There were significant effects for condition of ratee on each item of the Interactive factor. Results of post hoc comparisons showed that persons with disabilities were perceived as significantly: a) less enjoyable to be with, b) less relaxing to be with, c) less likeable, d) less happy, e) less popular, f) less cheerful, g) less physically attractive, h) less intelligent, and i) less aggressive than both the minimally described person and the liked person. Thus on nine of the thirteen interactive items the person with a disability was perceived as differing in a negative way the able-bodied person.

On four remaining items, (adjustment, trustworthiness, honesty and similarity to oneself) the physically handicapped person and the minimally described person were both perceived as differing from the liked person. The liked person was perceived as significantly better adjusted, more trustworthy, more honest and more similar to the raters than either the minimally described person or the persons with disabilities.

These findings indicate that on most interactive qualities the disabled person is perceived as different from a comparable able-bodied person and that these difference are in a negative direction. Persons with disabilities were consistently perceived as less interactively attractive than a liked person.

Independence Factor

For the first item of the two-item independence factor, the analyses indicated that persons with disabilities were rated as significantly lower in self confidence than both the minimally described person or the liked person. On the second item, "dependent on other people for help", the blind person and wheelchair person tended to be rated as more dependent than the minimally described person, liked person, and deaf person ($P < .02$). Generally these findings suggest that the disabled are perceived as different on the independence factor with their greater dependence and lower self-confidence being perceived as less desirable.

Conservatism Factor

Analyses of group means on the conservatism factor indicated that persons with disabilities were perceived as significantly more opposed to liberal ideas than either the liked person or the minimally described person. Similarly, the disabled tended to be viewed as more opposed to abortion on demand than either the liked person or the minimally described person ($P < .02$). Thus the disabled appear to be viewed as more conservative than both the average able-bodied person and the liked person.

Goodness Factor

Post hoc analysis of items on the Goodness factor indicated that the disabled were viewed as significantly more religious and significantly less impulsive than both the liked person and the minimally described person. Persons with disabilities were also perceived as different from the minimally described person but similar to the liked person on the "moral" and "courageous" items. On these items persons with disabilities and the liked person were viewed as more moral and more courageous than the minimally described person.

It seems that, in terms of personal goodness, the disabled are perceived as closer to the liked person than they are to the minimally described person. Yet perception of the disabled as more religious and less impulsive than even the liked person may suggest that the disabled are perceived as "overly good".

Self-Involvement Factor

On the first three items of the Self-Involvement factor disabled persons and the minimally described person received similar ratings. Persons with physical handicaps and the minimally described person were perceived as equally selfish, equally self-pitying, and equally frustrated with life. In contrast the liked

person was viewed as less selfish, less self-pitying, and less frustrated with life. On the final item, the belief that money is an important goal in life. persons with disabilities received ratings similar to the liked person. Both of these groups were viewed as believing that money is a significantly less important goal in life than persons in the minimal description condition. These results suggest that on traits relating to self-involvement the disabled are perceived as fairly similar to the minimally described or average able-bodied person.

Sensitivity Factor

On the sensitivity factor, persons with physical handicaps and the minimally described person were seen as equally emotional, equally sensitive, and equally creative. The liked person was viewed as more creative and also as somewhat less emotional ($P < .05$) and somewhat less sensitive ($P < .09$) than both the minimally described and disabled person. On the remaining item, conscientious, persons with disabilities tended to be described as more conscientious ($P < .02$) than both the liked and the minimally described person. Thus, on three of the four items of the sensitivity factor the disabled and the minimally described person were viewed as similar.

Sex of Ratee, Sex of Rater, and Interaction Effects

A significant effect of sex of ratee was found on three items: conscientious, sensitive and the belief that money is an important goal in life. On one item, the belief that money is an important goal in life, a significant sex of rater effect was found. Finally, significant interactions effects were found on three items: physically attractive, selfish and attitudes toward liberal ideas. Inspection of the data producing these effects indicated that they did not qualify the condition of ratee findings in any consistent manner.

Discussion

The results indicate a number of dimensions along which the disabled are viewed as different. In comparison with the average able-bodied person and the liked able-bodied person, the disabled were viewed as lacking interactive skills, as more dependent on others for help, as more politically conservative, and as more personally good. In two areas, self involvement and sensitivity, the disabled and the able-bodied were perceived as similar. In general, then, it appears that disabled are viewed as more different then similar to the nondisabled and as lacking in many of the qualities that a liked person possess.

These findings are particularly interesting since most subjects undoubtedly had some contact with physically handicapped persons. Participants in the research attend a university that has a special rehabilitation program. About two-hundred physically handicapped students are on campus. It is likely then that most of the respondents had either attended class with disabled persons or had seen them on campus.

Negative ratings of the disabled on interactive aspects could, in fact, result from these associations. Kleck, Ono, and Hastorf (1966) found that an able-bodied person tends to feel tense, uncomfortable, and constrained when first meeting a disabled person. Informal observation of students on campus suggests that the majority of the interactions between handicapped and non-handicapped students tends to be of a limited nature. This minimal contact may not be sufficient to permit initial discomfort to be overcome. Able bodied students may, however, have enough opportunity to realize that the handicapped students are not especially sensitive nor particularly more self-involved than other students.

This interpretation is supported by the finding that the strongest negative reactions to the disabled were found on the items "enjoyable to be with", and "relaxing to be with". While the minimally described person was seen as fairly relaxing to be with, persons with disabilities were generally rated closer to only somewhat ralaxing to be with.

A number of the findings of this research contrast with results reported by Comer and Piliavin (1975). In the present study the disabled and the able-bodied were viewed as equally sensitive, equally self-pitying, and less likeable. Comer and Piliavin found that the disabled were perceived as more sensitive, more pitying, and more rather than less likeable. It is possible that these discrepancies can be accounted for by differences in the nature of the samples tested. Participants in the Comer and Piliavin study, employees of the department store and customers in a barber shop, may well have had little or no contact with the disabled. Data from Comer and Piliavin's research may then represent social stereotypes held in the absence of contact with the disabled, while the present study may reflect the effects of minimal contact with the disabled.

An additional finding of the current research was that people with different disabilities are perceived as quite similar. The notion that there is a stereotype of the disabled as a group is given strong support by these results.

This study has implications for educating able-bodied professionals as well as disabled clients. An instrument such as the one used here might help in training social workers and counselors. It would be used to sensitize trainees to their attitudes toward the handicapped or used as a device for assessing outcomes of professional training. Hopefully, training experiences would reduce the extent to which the handicapped are perceived as different. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, disabled people could benefit from learning about the way they are perceived by others. This information could be used to help disabled persons interpret some of the reactions they receive from others.

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Footnote

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